# HR as Strategic Diversity Partners

**By Shilpa Pherwani**

To effectively integrate Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) in the HR role, HR professionals need to implement strategies for addressing conscious and unconscious biases in HR systems. Unconscious Biases are pervasive in most societies, and often people are unaware of their unconscious biases. It is important to address unconscious biases because behaviors that may arise from biases can demoralize team members and, undermine engagement and productivity.

While unconscious biases are pervasive, research shows that they are also possible to change. The FLEX Model, developed by Ibis Consulting Group, is a useful tool to address biases and promote inclusion.

**Focus Within:**
- Tune into your emotions
- Recognize how your experience has shaped your perspective
- Stick to facts, and don't make assumptions.
- Turn frustration into curiosity.

**Learn about others**
- Recognize how their experiences have shaped their perspective
- Consider how they might see the situation and what is important to them
- Think about how your actions may have impacted them

**Engage in dialogue**
- Ask open-ended questions
- Listen to understand, not to debate
- Offer your views without defensiveness or combativeness
- Disentangle impact from intent
- Avoid blame, think contribution

**"eXpand" the options**
- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Be flexible about different ways to reach a common goal
- Experiment and evaluate
- Seek out diverse perspectives

**Let's apply this tool to a HR scenario.**

As an HR member, you have just finished meeting with Claire, a senior manager, about a staffing matter. As she is leaving your office, she brings up another issue.

*"Hey, I just want to bring you up to speed on how things are going with Mario. He's been here 9 months now, and I'm having some concerns. He's meeting all the job requirements, but he doesn't strike me as a star performer. He's just a little too passive in meetings, he doesn't assert his point of view, and it seems like he's not aggressive enough to be successful here."*

*"I haven't said anything to him about it – I really don't know what to say, it's kind of a subtle thing. And I have to admit I'm a little nervous about how he may react – especially since he's the only Latino member of the team. At my last job when I tried to give a Latino employee some tough feedback, he implied I was being racist. So I've become a little cautious – maybe over-cautious. Anyway, I've got to run to another meeting….."*

*"Have a moment? I really could use some advice. You know I've been here 9 months and I think I've been doing a good job. I've received only positive feedback from Claire. Yet, she hasn't been giving me very challenging assignments and I'm starting to feel underutilized. I don't really feel like a valued member of the team, and I'm beginning to wonder about my future here. I'd really appreciate any insight you can offer."*

A few days later, before you've had a chance to follow up with Claire, Mario drops by your office.

You'd like to help Claire and Mario improve their communication and address any issues that are hampering their effectiveness. Using the FLEX model, you can work with Claire to effectively address this situation. Here are a few ideas on using the first piece of the FLEX model:

**Focus Within**

- Tell me a little bit more about your thinking.
- Tell me a little more about how you see Mario's performance issues.
- Tell me a little more about why you're hesitant to give Mario feedback on his performance.
- How do you think your personal experience may be impacting how you are viewing Mario?
- What has your history been with bringing diverse candidates into these types of positions?
- Are you making any assumptions about what it takes to be a "star performer"?

Stay tuned for ideas on using other pieces of the FLEX model to address unconscious biases…..

**Shilpa Pherwani**, the principal of IBIS and a leading expert in diversity and inclusion, has been guiding global organizations for over 12 years on leveraging diversity as a business advantage. An organizational psychologist by training, she partners with organizations to effect sustainable organizational change by conducting cultural

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Shilpa collaborates with key stakeholders to strategically plan, implement, and measure diversity initiatives. Shilpa has worked with global organizations to guide management and executives on being effective across cultural and geographical boundaries. She delivers outcome driven and systemic consultation to diversity committees, senior members of HR and business leaders. Shilpa's clients include Aetna, Barclaycard US, Boeing, Campbell Soup, Framingham State University, Grainger, Genzyme, Microsoft, Nestle, Progress Software, Sun Life Financial, State Street Bank, Texas Health Resources, Thrivent Financial of Lutherans, Tredegar Corporation, and Williams Sonoma.

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